Parapsychology Bulletin

Issued in connection with the *Journal of Parapsychology*, Duke University Press, Durham, N. C.

Edited by Dorothy H. Pope

Number 33 February, 1954

An English Explorer in Parapsychology
Dr. Robert H. Thouless

Dr. Robert H. Thouless of Cambridge University spent the fall semester of this academic year as a visiting Research Fellow at the Parapsychology Laboratory of Duke University. He came on a grant from the Fulbright Commission. Dr. Thouless has been making contributions of his time, energy, and thought to this field for many years. His activities have extended into almost every branch of parapsychology, which is one of the reasons why his efforts have had such wide influence and why we should like to give here a brief résumé of what he has done.

Dr. Robert H. Thouless

Since it is often difficult to see how the facts of parapsychology fit in with knowledge in other fields, it is necessary for parapsychologists to be pliable and even adventuresome in their attitudes. Open-mindedness is one of the characteristics which, probably more than any other, has enabled Dr. Thouless to make his outstanding contributions to the field. As early as 1925, when the present period of research development was just beginning to take form, he mildly chided his fellow-psychologists for being stodgy in their attitude toward the findings in psychical research. "It must be admitted," he wrote in a letter to the *Manchester Guardian* that year, "that the contribution of laboratory psychologists to psychical research is not always very helpful. . . . What would we think of a physicist who said that he would not believe . . . in ball-lightning unless it could be produced in his own back garden at a prescribed date? Yet psychologists often adopt an attitude not far removed from this in their criticisms of psychical research."

By profession Thouless is a psychologist, if one can so limit a career which has been closely interwoven with activity in the fields of education, religion, mathematics, and parapsychology. After his graduation from Cambridge in 1915, he returned for a Master's degree and then, in 1922, for his Doctorate. His thesis was on the psychology of religion.

The first post to which he was appointed was that of Lecturer in Psychology at Manchester University, in 1921; and the second, a similar appointment at Glasgow University in 1926. Then, in 1938, he returned to Cambridge as Lecturer in Psychology in the Department of Education. Since 1945 he has been Reader in Educational Psychology and a Fellow of Corpus Christi College.

It was while he was stationed in Glasgow that he read before the London S.P.R. a paper dealing with the reports of the first work of J. B. Rhine and his colleagues at the Duke Parapsychology Laboratory. Although he offered detailed criticism of the findings, he offered them

in an explicit and fair-minded manner and concluded that Rhine had "shifted the burden of proof on to those who deny that extrasensory perception is a fairly common capacity." In 1937 he prepared for the S.P.R. a critical study of Whately Carington's work on quantitative studies of trance personalities, and later, for a time, he supervised Carington's investigations.

Dr. Thouless's progress in parapsychology led him first through a minute, critical examination of the new findings, then to the determination to experiment and find out for himself, if possible, whether the phenomena occur, and finally to an objective acceptance of the facts in spite of their apparent incongruousness and the difficult theoretical problems which they introduced. After his paper on the early Duke research in the *Proceedings of the S.P.R.* he carried out some experiments of his own. One, performed while he was in Glasgow, gave only chance results; another in 1942, with himself as subject, gave positive results. Even before this he had been convinced of the reality of ESP; and as time moved on and others seemed to be endlessly debating the question, he advised them that there was already sufficient proof and that mere repetition of the findings of Rhine, Tyrrell, and Soal was a waste of time. "Let us get on to other problems to be solved by other methods," he said in his Presidential Address to the S.P.R. in 1942. There had been other distinguished psychologists—notably William McDougall and William James—who had shown a favorable attitude toward ESP, but Thouless was the first to express himself so emphatically.

As the field developed, Thouless carried on experiments along new lines. His 1943 tests on PK effects in coin-spinning gave positive results. A few years later, in 1949, he succeeded in producing evidence of precognition and clairvoyance in some research involving three different types of ESP tests carried out concurrently, with himself as subject. An experiment in 1951 gave further evidence of PK and described some of the psychological factors thought to favor success in the tests.

The experimental side of the research has not appropriated all of Thouless's attention, however. From time to time he has published articles on the special statistical methods that have evolved along with the research, and he has frequently rounded out his point of view by investigations into the spontaneous psi phenomena as they occur in nature. At other times he has been interested in hauntings, mediumship, and various claims involving physical phenomena belonging to parapsychology. His interest in the survival question, too, is very evident in the Myers Memorial Lecture which he delivered in 1952 and in the fact that he has devised a special test bearing on the question of survival after death. His test consists of a coded message, the key to which he will try to communicate through a medium after his death. The idea is that if no medium can correctly give the key to the message while he is still alive, but one is found who can do so after his death, the evidence for survival will be strengthened.

The new concepts that have grown out of the research have often found insufficient expression in old words and theories. Thouless's response to this problem has been to try to develop exact terminology and form tentative hypotheses to encompass the new data. The use of the word *psi*, for instance, to cover all types of parapsychological phenomena was suggested by Thouless and Dr. B. P. Wiesner.

Thouless and Wiesner also made contributions on one of the most vexing—and yet most challenging—problems which parapsychologists face: the difficult job of squaring off their findings with the commonly accepted facts (and beliefs) of the other sciences. In one of their articles they offered the hypothesis that ESP and PK may be primitive processes which have been crowded out in the course of evolution to make way for sensory perception and motor response as more efficient methods of gaining

knowledge and manipulating the environment. They also suggested in another article a hypothesis by which some of the findings of parapsychology could be made to fit in with those of psychology and physiology. In ordinary thinking and perceiving, they suggested, one has the same relationship to what goes on in his own brain and nervous system as a clairvoyant has to some external event that he perceives by ESP. Similarly in normal motor reactions, one controls his nervous system by PK just as a subject in a dice test controls the dice by PK.

In addition to the many articles dealing with parapsychology and the various other fields in which he is interested, Thouless has written six books: *General and Social Psychology* (a standard work in psychology), *An Introduction to the Psychology of Religion, The Lady Julian, The Control of the Mind, Straight and Crooked Thinking* (published in America as *How to Think Straight*), and *Straight Thinking in War Time.*

In 1937 he held the presidency of the Psychology Section of the British Association for the Advancement of Science, and in 1949, the presidency of the British Psychological Society. The Royal Institution in 1950 invited him to present a paper on parapsychology; and in 1952, he delivered the Hulsean Lectures (an endowed lecture series at Cambridge on a subject connected with theology). These lectures are to be published in April under the title *Authority and Freedom* (Some Psychological *Problems of Religious Belief*). In 1953 he received the Sc.D. degree from Cambridge and was also appointed to the Archbishop of Canterbury's Committee on Divine Healing.

In parapsychology, Dr. Thouless continues to reach out in new directions. His most recent activities are two pieces of research carried out during the recent months at the Parapsychology Laboratory. One, involving the general question of the selectivity of the ESP process, was a GESP test, on each trial of which the agent, or sender, tried to send only one of two selected targets. The other was an experiment with Dr. J. G. Pratt who is investigating types of animal behavior which may involve ESP. Dr. Thouless joined Dr. Pratt in carrying out some tests of distance orientation in homing pigeons.

General News

A grant of one thousand dollars has been made by the Parapsychology Foundation to Robert Van de Castle for animal research in parapsychology. Mr. Van de Castle plans to work on problems regarding ESP in rats and will do this research at the Southern Bio-Research Laboratory at Florida Southern College under the guidance of Dr. Boris Sokoloff, director of the laboratory. When Van de Castle received his M.A. in psychology from the University of Missouri last summer, the thesis which he submitted dealt with a problem in ESP: whether the meaningfulness of the target material in an ESP test is related to the scoring level.

Dr. J. Ricardo Musso of the Argentine Institute of Parapsychology is scheduled to present two papers on parapsychology at the Argentine Congress of Psychology to be held in March at the National University of Tucumán. The first paper is entitled, "The Investigations of the Parapsychology Laboratory of Duke University (with Special Attention to Mathematical Methods of Analysis)." The second is "Experimental Tests of ESP and PK (and Their Mathematical Evaluation)."

In this second paper Dr. Musso reports on ESP experiments carried out by himself and others at the Argentine Institute. Some were card tests with a gifted subject, Dr. Ronald W——, whose scoring rates as reported were remarkably high—in some precognition tests he had an average score of 7.2 per 25 trials for 30 runs. A section of the report describes four tests conducted after the manner of those carried out in Holland by Prof. W. H. C. Tenhaeff in testing his subject, Croiset. One hour before a performance was to begin in the Buenos Aires Theatre, the subject, Sr. Conrado

Castiglioni, attempted to give a description of the person who would occupy a specified seat in the audience. The seat was selected in a random manner and the tests were heavily witnessed. The report makes an impressively favorable case for the subject's ability: 33 right out of 42 statements.

Books and Articles

The January, 1954, *Bulletin of the Menninger Clinic* contains a paper on "Personality Dynamics and Psychical Research" by Gertrude R. Schmeidler, with an introduction by Gardner Murphy. The article discusses the effect which such factors as relaxation, intellectual interest in the theory of ESP, and social conformity have produced on the ESP scores of Schmeidler's subjects. This paper was originally presented by the author to a conference of the Department of Adult Psychiatry of the Menninger Foundation in Topeka.

Antony Flew is the author of a recently published book, *A New Approach to Psychical Research* (Watts, London). This book does not present new material; it is a popularly written evaluative description, for the layman, of the present position and future outlook of psychical research. It covers the experimental work as well as spontaneous phenomena, mediumship, and the problem of survival. The "new" in the approach, the author explains, is "the combination of a resolute, yet not invincible skepticism . . . with a constant awareness of language" as a means of coping with this body of unfamiliar concepts.

Psychoanalysis and the Occult (International Universities Press), edited by George Devereux, is an anthology of all psychoanalytic papers dealing with the problem of psi phenomena which are based on the clinical or personal experiences of psychoanalysts. Altogether there are thirty-one articles, some of which (including one of Freud's) are in English for the first time. A review of the book is scheduled for the *Journal of Parapsychology.*

A popular article on parapsychology by Aldous Huxley appeared in *Life* magazine for January 11. "A Case for ESP, PK, and Psi" points out the boundaries of parapsychology, gives a brief history of its development, and discusses its present standing and its implications for philosophy, psychology, biology, religion, and ethics. The article is to be condensed for the April *Reader's Digest.*

Two other books mention parapsychology briefly. In *The Living Brain* (W. W. Norton and Co.) W. Grey Walter, the British physiologist, says there is no scientific support for the hypothesis that ESP can be explained on the basis of electrical activity of the brain, nor can it be easily explained by any other biological mechanism. In the posthumous volume, *Reflections on Life* (Hawthorne Books, Inc.) Alexis Carrel cites intuition and ESP as distinctive human attributes which indicate that man is something more than a purely materialistic being.

The Spencer Brown controversy on the statistical evidence for ESP and PK is continued in the December and February numbers of the *Scientific American.* In the Letters section, R. A. McConnell, J. H. Rush, R. H. Thouless, and Spencer Brown make further comments in response to the magazine's October article.

In the preface to his latest book, *Immortality* (Prentice Hall), Alson J. Smith says that the Church can be restored to authority only by "a verification, by science through experiment, of the psychic phenomena on which it was originally built." In his book he reviews what he considers the best types of evidence of survival.

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